DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 303 820 CS 211 676

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TITLE Shaping Literacy Response through Collaborative Writing.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Communication; Computer Uses in Education; *Grouping (Instructional Purposes); Higher Education; *Literature Appreciation; Reader Response
IDENTIFIERS Collaborative Learning; *Collaborative Writing

ABSTRACT

A teacher of an undergraduate literature course, inspired by the increasing use of collaborative writing in the workplace and by reader-response criticism, required a collaborative writing assignment in the course. A computer laboratory equipped as a local area network (LAN) was instrumental, enabling sustained, serious collaboration. Students were organized into sub-directory groups, each with three to five members. Each group was assigned a text, a completion date, and given a suggested series of 8 steps to follow. Each group came up with a product, only one of which seemed not to have been genuinely collaborative. Responses to debriefing questionnaires filled out by the 29 students in the class: (1) indicated high satisfaction with the collaborative writing experience; (2) described the roles students fulfilled in undertaking and completing the projects, suggesting that each group functioned differently; and (3) indicated that all students felt the collaborative writing activity had positively affected their involvement with and interpretation of the literary work on which it was based. (SR)

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SHAPING LITERARY RESPONSE THROUGH COLLABORATIVE WRITING

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Since writing collaboratively has become commonplace in many business firms and government agencies, should we in academia be placing students in situations that require collaborative effort? If so, how can a collaborative writing assignment be insinuated into a course so that students will take it seriously, since it requires changes in their--and the instructor's--traditional ways of working?

Having chosen in 1987 to teach an undergraduate literature course, I made a major departure from previous practice--both my own and the prevailing teaching methodologies of a large, traditionally-oriented university. Though I had always encouraged discussion in my courses, I had not freed myself or my students from the usual constraints of college classrooms: all chairs facing front; instructor as habitual discussion leader; individual writing assignments read only by the instructor. These were "normal" procedures, I had come to see, only because they were customary. They might have little to do with powerful learning.

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Reading reader-reponse criticism had persuaded me that students are likely to become more fully engaged with literary texts if they take major responsibility for directing interpretive inquiry. They need to determine the questions to be asked and to sort and sift textual evidence that can support more than one interpretation. They should not see the teacher as the ultimate authority and should view established critics as fellow interpreters, not as possessing the last word.

When principles of reader-response criticism are applied in a classroom, they change the physical arrangement and the intellectual atmosphere. Rows of chairs give way to a circle. The instructor's position moves from lectern or desk to part of the circle. Discussion proceeds from student to student, with plenty of eye contact. It is often open-ended and exploratory, leaving each participant to draw conclusions and mull them rather than to leave class with a notebook full of conclusions delivered by the instructor.

But open-ended discussion is not enough. Writing should help each student shape and focus the interpretive possibilities begun through discussion. Theories about writing as a way of learning offer the sub-structure for such methodology; they suggest that students should be writing continuously, that much of that writing will not proceed beyond draft state but some of it will be revised

and published, and that writing will be shared within the class as the term proceeds.

While it is possible to employ these strategies in the customary classroom, a computer laboratory equipped as a local area network makes them even more feasible. When students can communicate interactively without having to be in the same physical space, the likelihood of sustained, serious collaboration rises markedly. The LAN has become for me the means for turning the usual four- or five-day-a-week class into a community pervaded by collaboration.

Students are organized into sub-directory groups, each with three to five members. They write responses to the assigned texts and comment on one another's responses, thus creating a continuous dialogue about the literature. Comments made during class discussion find their way into LAN exchanges, and LAN exchanges feed class discussion.

If these exchanges provide the groundwork and context for collaboration, why not build other collaborative projects upon it? Why not take advantage of the impulses fostered by regular intra-group communication to urge students to do genuinely collaborative writing, much as they might do it in a business or other vocational setting?

To do this, they needed guidance or a suggested series of steps to follow. This is the procedure I used:

The purpose for the piece of collaborative writing created by each sub-directory group was to stimulate class discussion; hence, it was due at the beginning of the calendar period designated for discussion of each literary text.

Each sub-directory group was assigned a text and given a completion date--this assignment made early enough in the term for students to plan it into their schedules.

Work was to begin two weeks before the completion date, with a series of eight stages recommended:

> Stage I (2 weeks before due date): Get together for an hour or so after each group member has read the assigned book once. Decide on one person to be SYNTHESIZER, one to be CLOCK\DATE WATCHER, one to be FINAL EDITOR.

Brainstorm questions and topic ideas:

--brainstorm for 10 to 15 minutes without commenting on or evaluating any suggestion

--write down all suggestions

--reread suggestions & elaborate each

--select about 6 that seem most promising

--each person copies the 6 most promising ideas

Stage II (12 days before due date): Go to LAN individually to freewrite on at least 1 or 2 of the promising ideas. Each group member reacts and prints out others' freewriting.

Stage III (10 days before due date): Have another meeting to determine a common area of interest; try to do some initial sketching out of a way to develop that topic.

Stage IV (8 days before due date): Each group member starts drafting that topic representing the common area of interest. CLOCK\DATE WATCHER checks adherence to schedule and chides laggards.

Stage V (5 days before due date): SYNTHESIZER combines first drafts into first collaborative version. Each group member reads this version and comments.

Stage VI (3 days before due date): SYNTHESIZER incorporates comments and produces second collaborative version.

Stage VII (2 days before due date): Group meets again, if necessary.

Stage VIII (Due date): EDITOR prepares final draft and copies it to all other sub-directories.

Although each group was responsible for carrying out this procedure on their own, outside of scheduled class time, I asked each group to meet for about an hour with me mid-way through the process. They explained how they had approached the many complex tasks involved in the assignment, made a progress report, and received suggestions from me as appropriate.

The result? Each group came up with a product, only one of which seemed not to have been genuinely collaborative. The group had adopted a strategy of divide and conquer: a

festschrift of separate essays about the text, loosely introduced as a collection invited by a fictional editor. Most other groups adopted an imaginative rhetorical setting, such as dialogue or letters--variable, of course, in degree of intellectual substance and adroitness of execution but all useful in one way or another for the intended purpose.

But let the students speak for themselves. Each of the twenty-nine students in the class filled out a one-page debriefing questionnaire, responding to four questions I set for them. I asked first for an overall satisfaction rating: high, moderate, or low. No one checked "low." Thirty-eight percent rated the collaborative writing experience "moderate" and 62% rated it "high." (Whether they were saying that to please me, I'm not sure.)

I asked them to explain the role they fulfilled in undertaking and completing the project. This question seemed especially pertinent since my instructions had delineated recommended roles, though I had no way of enforcing their assumption of these roles. Indeed, each group seemed to have functioned differently.

One member of the group that was among the most successful said, "We did not assign roles in our group . . . " The other two amplified with "I pushed others to complete their work, had a substantial contribution and compromised on others' opinions" and "All of us pretty much had an equal amount of responsibility. We all did our individual piece, then put them in an order together."

In the group that succeeded least well in achieving a true collaborative product, one member revealed the difficulty: "We pretty much worked together on a somewhat equal level, constantly contributing and investigating new ideas. We discussed many, but were unable to decide on one clearcut idea on which to base the whole paper. Finally we decided on several letters with separate ideas about the book [The Island of Doctor Moreau] in general (i.e., allegories, etc.). We each went off and separately wrote each letter. I wrote the letter on the Biblical allegory. We then came together as a group and picked the letters apart. We added to them, as well as deleting some, but each final letter was agreed upon by all three of us. In summary, the ideas were from all three of us, the letters' bulk were individually written, and the final letters edited by all three."

The group that achieved the highest collaborative integration, both in product and process, composed together at the computer, two men standing at each side of the third, reading what he was writing and then changing places at the keyboard. Having chosen a dramatic dialogue format, they collaborated by casting themselves in dramatic roles, rather than the functional ones I had suggested. The story, "Bobok" by Dostoyevsky, lent itself well to this interpretive approach. Steve, the most articulate one, wrote, "I tried to attempt the role of synthesizer and consciously stayed away from trying to be the leader. I was duly impressed with the ideas of my collaborators and thus was not keen on losing those ideas nor mine. The idea of posing as editors [of a journal to which the "Bobok" manuscript had been submitted] was an attempt to maintain the integrity of self within a group framework."

One of his colleagues echoed this view, saying, "We all felt that the worst part of collaborative writing is that you have to compromise your opinions. The problem with compromise is that it weakens a paper. The paper wouldn't have my opinions or Steve's or Noah's. The paper would have bits and pieces of our opinions and thus be weaker than any one of our arguments. So we used the play to express all our views."

The group of four that was working with Stevenson's "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" adopted a divide-and-conquer strategy, as explained by one of its members: "Beginning with a list of possible topics, we trimmed it down until two remained that were satisfactory to all. Because we had different opinions, we split the group into two subgroups of two, each representing one of the Jekyll/Hyde characters. Jake and I were Hyde, so we prepare a list of defenses and accusations on behalf of Hyde while Tony and Rich were to do the same for Jekyll. The two lists were then integrated by matching common topics. We later molded it into a dialogue form."

The most important debriefing question was "How did this collaborative writing activity affect your involvement with and interpretation of the literary work on which it was based?" Everyone, without exception, commented positively on this point:

"Since "Bobok" is such a symbolic work . . . each of us interpreted it differently. It was fun to discover this. We reread it over and over again."

"I was forced to look at the book ["Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"] from different perspectives. . . . I found myself swaying from the 'read once' idea that Dr. Jekyll was good and Mr. Hyde was responsible for all of the evil that was done to the idea that the paper represented."

"I saw many new ideas I never would have found otherwise."

"I guess the biggest help was simply putting more time into the book by discussing, writing, discussing and writing--instead of only discussing and writing."

"I derived, from the group effort, as much meaning as a week of classroom discussion. It gave us all a good deal of knowledge and opinions about the text and gave us some authority in classroom discussion."

"The activity itself made me ponder more on the text. It didn't exactly open my eyes, rather opened pathways or channels of thought."

"It allowed me a more indepth look in a shorter time. I was exposed more thoroughly to the different topics during our discussions."

"This writing activity gave me an opportunity to scrutinize, more than usual, the book. After all, the group and I were in the spotlight. We would have to defend our work. . . . It being a collaborative effort allowed me to pick up subtle details that I might have skipped if no one had brought it to my attention."

"I thought about it much more than I would have, and this was due, no doubt to 'negotiating' ideas with each other. There seems something 'wrong' with the idea of

consensus in literature and we were able to make room for each other. I, we, lived in the story by posing as a part of the process."

"It was an incredible aid. . . . When I listened to their opinions and why they had them it occasionally modified my thoughts. The exchange of ideas was incredible."

The only negative reaction students reported about the collaborative activity was time limitations. Though they had a two-week period to work, a late start or inability to meet often enough outside of class time led to some intense feelings of having to accomplish too much in too little time--a common complaint among academics!

When the collaborative written products--placed in each of the LAN sub-directories--had been read by everyone else in the class, they became grist for the week's discussion about the text. Each member of the group, of course, had a stake in the ideas introduced into the forum. Collaboration had been a means of inquiry for the common good.